

Message Text

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PAGE 01 COLOMB 02048 01 OF 02 021211Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 NEAE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
ICA-11 COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04 SIL-01 HA-05 /082 W
-----129350 021235Z /50

P R 021145Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0247
INFO AMEMBASSY DACCA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMCONSUL MADRAS

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 COLOMBO 2048

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TAGS: PINT, CE

SUBJ: SRI LANKA'S NEW MAY DAY

1. SUMMARY

MAY DAY IN SRI LANKA, TRADITIONALLY A DAY FOR POLITICAL PARTY AND TRADE UNION RIVALRY, TOOK ON A SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT CAST THIS YEAR. THE GOVERNMENT IN 1977 BANNED POLITICAL PROCESSIONS AND STREET DEMONSTRATIONS AND HAD CONSIDERED APPLYING THE BAN TO MAY DAY. HOWEVER, WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR THAT KEEPING THE CLAMPS ON MIGHT CAUSE RATHER THAN PREVENT TROUBLE, IT WISELY RELENTED AND ALLOWED THE USUAL MAY DAY ACTIVITIES. THE GOVERNMENT TOOK PRECAUTIONS TO ENSURE A PEACEFUL MAY DAY AND THE DAY PASSED WITHOUT ANY REPORTED CLASHES OR INCIDENTS. THIS IS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO LAST YEAR, WHEN DISORDERS WERE WIDESPREAD. END SUMMARY.

2. PRECAUTIONS

IN THE PAST, PARTIES IN POWER HAD ALLOCATED BUSES AND TRUCKS
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PAGE 02 COLOMB 02048 01 OF 02 021211Z

FROM GOVERNMENT OWNED CORPORATIONS TO POLITICAL PARTIES ON THE BASIS OF PARTY STRENGTH IN THE NATIONAL STATE ASSEMBLY. THE BUSES AND TRUCKS WERE USED TO TRANSPORT PARTY SUPPORTERS AND FAMILIES FROM ALL OVER THE ISLAND TO COLOMBO AT A NOMINAL CHARGE OF ONE RUPEE PER PERSON. THE COSTS WERE USUALLY COVERED BY BUSINESSMEN IN AN AREA, WHO ALSO PROVIDED FREE MEALS AND BEVERAGES. THIS YEAR, THE GOVERNMENT PROHIBITED THE USE

OF BUSES AND TRUCKS FOR SUCH PURPOSES AND STARTING THREE DAYS BEFORE MAY DAY WOULD NOT ALLOW TRUCKS TO CARRY GROUPS INTO COLOMBO. EXCEPT FROM THE SUBURBS, RELATIVELY FEW PEOPLE CAME INTO COLOMBO FOR MAY DAY. POLICE ON MAIN RAODS LEADING INTO COLOMBO SEARCHED FOR KNIVES AND FIREARMS. ON MAY DAY ITSELF, 3000 POLICE WERE ON DUTY IN COLOMBO AND WERE BACKED UP BY MILITARY RESERVES ON STANDBY. PROCESSION ROUTES OF VARIOUS PARTIES WERE PLANNED SO THAT NONE CROSSED.

3. GOVERNMENT TACTIC

THE GOVERNMENT'S MOST POTENT PRECAUTION WAS TO TAKE ITSELF OUT OF A POPULARITY CONTEST BASED ON THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE IT COULD ATTRACT TO THE TRADITIONAL PARTY PROCESSION AND RALLY. WITH ITS COMMANDING POWER, IT WOULD PROBABLY HAVE WON SUCH A CONTEST. INSTEAD OF DULL PARADES OF PARTY SUPPORTERS AND SCHOOL CHILDREN AND ENDLESS POLITICAL SPEECHES, THE GOVERNMENT PARTY CHOSE INSTEAD TO OFFER THE PEOPLE ENTERTAINMENT. THE UNP CREATED A HOLIDAY ATMOSPHERE BY STAGING A CULTURA PRESENTATION ON GALLE FACE GREEN - AIR FORCE FLYOVERS AND AEREOBATICS, SRI LANKA AND INDIAN CELEBRITIES, MUSICIANS, PAGEANTS, FIRE WORKS - ATTRACTING UP TO 100,000 ENTERTAINMENT-STARVED SRI LANKANS, SOME OF WHOM MIGHT OTHERWISE HAVE ATTENDED OTHER POLITICAL PARTY RALLIES.

4. POLITICAL PARTY RALLIES AND SPEECHES. UNITED NATIONAL PARTY (UNP): LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 COLOMB 02048 01 OF 02 021211Z

IN SPEECHES, THE PRESIDENT AND PRIME MINISTER SAID GOVERNMENT HAS GIVEN COMPLETELY NEW ORIENTATION TO MAY DAY, CHANGING IT FROM A DAY OF POLITICAL RIVALRY TO ONE OF NATIONAL CELEBRATION. THEY ALSO NOTED THAT SRI LANKA IS ONE OF THE FOREMOST DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD. ALL POLITICAL PARTIES ARE FREE TO FUNCTION WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS, THERE ARE NO POLITICAL PRISONERS, AND NO UNJUST LAWS OR EMERGENCY REGULATIONS. THEY ALSO PROMISED TO FULFILL ELECTION PLEDGE TO PROVIDE EMPLOYMENT TO YOUTH, 168,000 JOBS THIS YEAR AND 200,000 NEXT.

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PAGE 01 COLOMB 02048 02 OF 02 021219Z

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5. OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES

OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES WENT ALONG WITH THE OLD WAYS - PROCESSIONS, RALLIES, AND SPEECHES, WITH VARYING DEGREES OF SUCCESS.

(A) SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY (SLFP)

HARDEST HIT BY THE TRANSPORTATION RESTRICTIONS WAS THE SLFP WHICH DRAWS STRENGTH PREDOMINANTLY FROM THE RURAL AREAS. WHILE MRS. BANDARANAIKE SPOKE, THE CROWD PEAKED AT ABOUT 10,000. SHE ATTACKED THE GOVERNMENT FOR TRYING TO SELL THE COUNTRY TO FOREIGNERS THROUGH THE FREE TRADE ZONE AND ON PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSIONS DESIGNED TO DESTROY SLFP LEADERSHIP. HOWEVER, HER MAIN THEME WAS UNITY OF THE LEFT, SAYING SLFP HAD WORKED FOR COMMON FRONT WITH LEFT PARTIES AND EVEN TODAY IS FOR LEFT UNITY.

(B) UNITED LEFT FRONT (ULF)

THE ULF CELEBRATED MARY DAY WITHOUT ONE OF ITS MEMBERS. ONLY THE COMMUNIST PARTY MOSCOW WING (CP/M) AND THE LANKA SAMAJA SAMAJA PARTY (LSSP) JOINED THE PROCESSION AND RALLY. THE PEOPLES DEMOCRATIC PARTY (PDP)

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PAGE 02 COLOMB 02048 02 OF 02 021219Z

ELECTED TO JOIN WITH THE COMMUNIST PARTY/PEKING WING (CP/P) AND OTHER MINOR RADICAL LEFT PARTIES AND GROUPS. THE ULF, NOTING THAT THERE ARE 24 ULTRA LEFT SPLINTER GROUPS AIMED AT SMASHING CAPITALISM, CALLED FOR UNITY OF ALL PROGRESSIVE FORCES, INCLUDING PROGRESSIVES IN SLFP. IT CRITICIZED UNP AND SLFP FOR NOT SOLVING COUNTRY'S PROBLEMS AND FOR DEFENDING CAPITALISTS' INTERESTS AND ATTACKED GOVERNMENT FOR NOT FULFILLING ITS PROMISES TO PEOPLE. TURNOUT FOR ULF RALLY WAS 5,000 TO 6,000, CONSIDERED A POOR SHOWING.

(C) JANATHA VIMUKTHI PERAMUNA (JVP)

JVP PROBABLY MADE STRONGEST SHOWING OF NON-GOVERNMENT PARTIES. PROCESSION WAS LONGEST AND AS MANY AS 15,000 WERE AT RALLY, THE MAJORITY OF THEM IN THE 16-30 AGE BRACKET. THEY APPEARED TO BE THE MOST DEDICATED AND DISCIPLINED OF ALL POLITICAL PARTIES' SUPPORTERS. MOST OF THE JVP VITRIOL WAS DIRECTED AT THE LEFT PARTIES, CALLING THE ULF NEITHER UNITED, LEFT, NOR A FRONT BECAUSE OF DEEP DIVISIONS IN IT. JVP ALSO ANNOUNCED PROGRAM FOR FORMING TRADE UNIONS IN ALL WORKPLACES.

(D) THERE WERE SEVERAL OTHER SMALL RALLIES, BUT THEY HAD SMALL TURNOUTS AND WERE INCONSEQUENTIAL.

6. COMMENT

BY ALLOWING MAY DAY CELEBRATIONS TO TAKE PLACE, THE GOVERNMENT LIVED UP TO THE PRESIDENT'S DESCRIPTION OF SRI LANKA AS A FREE AND DEMOCRATIC COUNTRY. IT WOULD HAVE COME UNDER INTENSE DOMESTIC CRITICISM FOR SUPPRESSING THE RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLE AND WORKERS TO MEET AND EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS HAD IT NOT DONE SO. MOREOVER, AT THE DIRECTION OF THE GOVERNMENT, FOR THE FIRST TIME THE GOVERNMENT-OWNED LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 COLOMB 02048 02 OF 02 021219Z

SRI LANKA BROADCASTING COMPANY (SLBC) AND THE PRESS GAVE FULL AND EQUAL COVERAGE TO ALL THE RALLIES, INCLUDING ANTI-GOVERNMENT STATEMENTS. IN THE PAST, IT GAVE LIVE COMMENTARIES ON GOVERNMENT PARTY RALLIES AND MERELY MENTIONED THAT OTHERS WERE TAKING PLACE. THE GOVERNMENT PLANNED WELL AND MINIMIZED THE RISK OF POLITICAL PARTY CLASHES. IT IS UNWISE TO ATTEMPT TO ASSIGN POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE TO THE MAY DAY EVENTS BASED ON CROWDS AND SPEECHES. BUT THE GOVERNMENT WITH ITS RATIONAL APPROACH APPEARS TO HAVE COME OUT AHEAD THIS YEAR. WHETHER IT HAS CHANGED THE CHARACTER OF MAY DAY CELEBRATIONS AND STARTED A NEW AND LASTING TRADITION IS PROBLEMATICAL. WRIGGINS

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